

Transforming Bible Study

by Walter Wink

Walter Wink uses this approach in his book *Transforming Bible Study*; it is also the basis of Patricia Van Ness's book *Transforming Bible Study with Children*. Both books would give additional help to the group leader.

This process requires careful planning and preparation by the group leader. The questions in steps 3 and 4 need to be thought out and formulated beforehand. If imaginative meditation is to be used, it needs to be developed before the meeting. If activities are planned, materials need to be obtained and set up. Someone inexperienced in doing this type of process may wish to seek a mentor to help design and guide the process until the group is used to it. Once it is familiar to everyone, group members can help plan and facilitate the process.

Ground rules for use of this approach are as follows:

- The text is the focus, not the leader. The leader poses questions that enable the participants to enter into dialogue with the meaning of the text at all levels.
- Everyone is invited to join the conversation. Each member of the group has a different perspective to offer that will increase understanding of the text and its application.
- Everyone is equal before the text. Both learned scholars and beginners have their own responses to the text.

Step 1. Take time for silent centering. Participants quietly explore the anxieties and expectations they have brought with them. They examine how willing they are to let something new happen and whether they can be open to the Spirit and to one another.

Step 2. Someone reads the passage from Scripture.

Step 3. The leader asks prepared questions about the context of the text. The questions are designed to help the group identify the critical issues in the text and to understand the text in its own right. For example, they might consider plucking on the Sabbath (Matthew 12:1-8; Mark 2:23-28; Luke 6:1-5).

- a. What is the charge brought against Jesus? What significance do you attach to the fact that it is the disciples, not Jesus, who are accused? Is the issue religious or economic?
- b. What is Jesus' defense? Does it meet the Pharisees' objection? How does Matthew change it?
- c. Explain the absence (in Matthew and Luke) of verse 27 in Mark. What do you think is the original core of the narrative?
- d. What is the basis for action on the Sabbath? What was its purpose? Does Jesus make "man the measure of all things?" Does he make himself the measure? Why doesn't Jesus take up the comparison with David and conclude, "so the Son of David is lord even of the Sabbath?" Does Jesus appeal to his own authority or to a principle inherent in the situation? In the material that Matthew adds, is the appeal made to Jesus' authority or to a principle inherent in the situation?
- e. Is Jesus granting his followers license to do what they do? What attitude does Jesus take toward the Sabbath here?
- f. Who or what is the "son of man" here? Is it Jesus?
- g. What do you learn about Jesus here?

Step 4. The leader asks questions that help the group members explore the impact the text is making on them. The group explores the linkages between the text and modern life. The leader may invite the group to enter imaginatively into one or more of the biblical characters and experience them in either their historical setting or in a modern context. The leader may ask the group to explore their emotional responses to the symbols and ideas; for example, the parable of the man with the withered hand (Mark 3:1-6; Matthew 12:9-14; Luke 6:6-11):

- a. The authorities do not understand Jesus' sense of justice in the scene. Why? At what point does the duty to comply with laws cease to be binding, in view of the need to help others Or to oppose injustice? How is this liberating power manifesting itself in us today as we relate to the power structure of society?
- b. Now close your eyes and envision that you are:
 - (1) Jesus coming into the synagogue on the Sabbath. You know that your opponents are present. You see a man with a deformed hand sitting in the congregation. Even though he asks nothing from you, you call him over and ask him to stretch out his hand. Then you heal him. Your enemies leave to

plot against you.

- (2) One of the Pharisees, entering the synagogue right behind this Galilean rabbi, whom you distrust. You, too, see the crippled man. You know Jesus can heal him, but if he does, he will have broken the Sabbath law against work. Jesus reminds you that the importance of life supersedes the law and calls the man to him. The man exposes his crippled hand to Jesus, and Jesus makes it well in front of your eyes. You leave to plot against Jesus.
- (3) The crippled man, sitting in the synagogue and waiting for the service to begin. Your withered and useless hand is resting in your lap. Because of your hand, you can't do heavy work. Life is difficult. There is a commotion at the door, and a stranger comes in — followed by a group of Pharisees. They begin talking about healing on the Sabbath, and suddenly the stranger turns to you and calls you over to the group. You go to him. "Stretch out your hand," he says, "and show us your crippled limb." And suddenly your hand is no longer crippled.

c. How did you feel as Jesus? as the Pharisee? as the crippled man? Which did you identify with most? Why?

d. Why does Jesus make the man display his withered hand? Are there times when we have to display our withered parts in order to be healed?

Step 5. The group explores how the text can be applied. Through music, movement, painting, sculpting, written dialogue, and small group discussion, each person allows the broken aspects of his or her life to be called forth into healing. For example, using the withered hand passage, distribute a piece of clay to each person. Have each person make the withered part within him or herself. Share in the whole group or smaller groups.

Close the group with prayer. The activity (like the one described above) may elicit emotions; a quiet time of prayer during which people are free to offer prayers aloud if they wish is helpful in facilitating the transition from the group experience to leaving.

*One of the Bible or lectionary study guides contributed by the members
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